

South Texas Birding & Nature | Trip Report

February 17 – 24, 2019 | Written by Michael Marsden



**With Guide Michael Marsden, and participants:
Avril, Flo, Nancy, Annie, Allyson, Sue, Jeanne, & Ann**



Sunday, February 17

We all met at noon, at Corpus Christi Airport, and it was apparent from the start that this was going to be a particularly harmonious and enthusiastic group. Everyone was excited to be birding what was, for most, a new region and anxious to start without delays for food or anything else. Right away we had our first memorable wildlife sighting – several Black-tailed Jackrabbits cavorting on the grass as we drove out of the Airport. Our initial destination was the Hans and Pat Suter Wildlife Refuge with its boardwalk overlooking Oso Bay in Corpus Christi. A happy augury as we walked in, was meeting Mel Cooksey, the grand not-so-old man of Coastal Bend birding, on his way out. He hadn't seen anything unusual but, for us, the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Reddish Egret, Neotropical Cormorants, Brown Pelicans, and American White Pelicans we came across were anything but 'usual' and formed a welcome introduction to Texas coastal birding.

We drove north on Mustang Island to Port Aransas, seeing many of the commoner waders and shorebirds on the way, as well as Crested Caracaras, and a hunting Peregrine Falcon. At Port Aransas, now largely recovered from the devastations of Hurricane Harvey, we birded as many of the key sites as we could in the time we had. Highlights were dozens of American Avocets at the Wetlands, Roseate Spoonbills in their blazing nuptial plumage at the still partially closed Birding Center, and a Bonaparte's Gull resting with other gulls and terns on the beach at the Jetty.

From there we caught the ferry back to the mainland on our way to our hotel, the Inn at Fulton Harbor, and dinner at Charlotte Plummer's Seafare, but we couldn't pass Rockport Beach Park without a quick look at the scores of Black Skimmers that roost and, later in the year, nest there. They seemed particularly co-operative on this visit, allowing us to get to within just a few feet of them, much to the delight of the photographers in our group.

Monday, February 18

This morning we were excited to be going on one of the *Skimmer's* celebrated Whooping Crane boat tours. These normally start at 7:30 am, but unfortunately, because of the Captain's prior commitments, our tour was scheduled for two hours later. We made good use of the time, though, partly by bringing in some hot tacos to supplement the Inn's continental breakfast, and partly by birding the Tule Wetlands in Rockport. This proved very productive with close views of Mottled Ducks, allowing us to distinguish their subtle field marks, and dozens of frenetically feeding White Ibises.



And the *Skimmer*, of course, didn't disappoint, despite unusually cold winds. Captain Tommy knows the bays intimately and was able to maneuver the boat to give us memorably intimate views of Whooping Cranes both feeding and in flight. We saw over twenty during the trip, while learning much from the Captain about their natural history, and came across lots of other species, including a trio of other strikingly handsome black and white birds – Buffleheads, American Oystercatchers, and American Avocets in their winter plumage. Other highlights were a majestic White-tailed Hawk flying over the boat and playful Bottle-nosed Dolphins swimming in its wake.

The late return of the boat precluded our visiting the Aransas NWR in the afternoon. After a barbeque lunch, we decided instead to spend the time on the Lamar Peninsula just north of Rockport. This worked out very happily, thanks largely to the concentration of birds around Twelfth Street. On the south side of the street are wetlands that often attract Whooping Cranes. There were two there during our visit, towering above the neighboring Sandhill Cranes, with an array of other water birds, including White and White-faced Ibises, Roseate Spoonbills, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, an Anhinga, and just about every heron and egret in the book. On Twelfth Street itself is Big Tree, reputedly the oldest and largest Live Oak in Texas. There we came across Eastern Bluebirds, an exceptionally early Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, a charm of American Goldfinches, and a loose feeding flock of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Yellow-rumped Warblers with a more unusual Pine Warbler.

After a detour to Cavasso Creek, where water levels were too high for the hoped-for shorebirds, we visited Goose Island State Park. At their feeders were Chipping, Lincoln's, and Field Sparrows, the latter being particularly welcome as they are rarities in the Valley and unlikely to be seen again on the trip. It was by then getting late, so we returned to the Inn and the delectable food of Rockport's Glow restaurant.





Tuesday, February 19

After breakfast, we set off on our journey south to the Rio Grande Valley. Driving out of Rockport we followed part of the 'Connie Hagar route'. Connie was a remarkable woman who put Rockport on the birding map in the late 1930's and 40's. Just about every morning she would drive a fairly standard route around the town keeping a list of all the birds she saw. Her sightings were so astonishing that they soon attracted the attention of Roger Tory Peterson and other leading birders of the day, several of whom came and stayed with her in her rental cottages in Rockport and were able to attest to the accuracy of her identifications.



We stopped briefly at four birding sites along Connie's route – there were Ring-necked Ducks at Moore's Pond, an array of wildfowl and waders at Cape Valero, lingering Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes at Live Oak Country Club, and the unforgettable sight of hundreds of feeding ibises and other waders on the fields at A-1 Hill Ponds, as well as our only Red-shouldered Hawk of the trip.

From there we drove on to Indian Point County Park in Corpus Christi. Water levels were too high for shorebirds other than long-legged Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets, though there were two Semipalmated Plovers on the beach ridge, but the Bay was productive with Common Loons, Buffleheads and Red-breasted Mergansers. Hazel Bazemore County Park was our only other Corpus stop, and there we saw our first Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, a flock of American Pipits, and a brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher.



After lunch in Kingsville, we stopped briefly at the Visitors' Center of the King Ranch, famed not only as the largest ranch in the U.S. but as one of the country's prime birding sites. The Center is unhappily some distance away from the best birding, but we did see our first Green Jays there and our only Wild Turkeys of the trip. We also had brief views of a female hummingbird, which at the time we simply listed as an *Archilochus*. but which was later specifically identified as a Ruby-throated.

We broke our journey from Kingsville to the Valley at the Sarita Rest Stop, as much for birding as more basic needs as it's one of the few places in South Texas where a flock of Brewer's Blackbirds can reliably be seen during the winter. And dutifully they were all there by the side of the van as we parked.

We arrived at the delightful Inn at Chachalaca Bend about 5:00 pm, which gave us a little time to unpack and do some birding before dinner at a local Mexican restaurant. We'd already seen a roosting

Great Horned Owl by the Inn's entrance, and now added Plain Chachalaca (of course!) and Great Kiskadee. From the Inn's viewing platform overlooking a resaca (the local name for an ox-bow lake), we also saw Anhingas and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, our last species for the day.

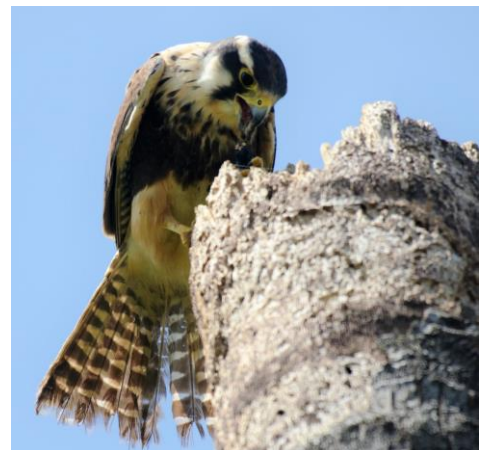
Wednesday, February 20

Breakfast at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend was served at 7:30 am, so we had time before then for some early morning birding on the Inn's 40 acres of grounds and nature trails. We were rewarded with great views of several Valley specialties – Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Long-billed Thrasher, Great Kiskadee, Black-crested Titmouse, and our first sighting of White-tipped Doves as they competed not always unsuccessfully with the many Plain Chachalacas at the Inn's feeding stations.

After the delicious breakfast, we had the rest of the day to cover as much of Cameron County as we could squeeze in. We initially drove north through Bayview with its miles of resacas to Laguna Atascosa NWR, where we birded the Kiskadee Trail and Osprey Overlook. New birds here included Harris's Hawk, Olive Sparrow, Altamira Oriole, and, much to our amusement, a hunting Greater Roadrunner. Flo also caught sight of a long staying, but notoriously elusive Black-headed Grosbeak, a rare bird in this part of the Valley. From there we headed to South Padre Island, with a brief stop at Port Isabel Reservoir on the way. The birds we came across on the Island were similar to those we had earlier seen on Mustang Island, but two Vermilion Flycatchers at the Convention Center were a welcome surprise. Back on the mainland, we drove south on Hwy 48, stopping briefly for Chihuahuan Ravens and White-tailed Hawks, and birded the Zapata Boat Ramp with its hundreds of Black Skimmers and other larids, including our only Gull-billed Terns.

Before driving into Brownsville, we made a detour to Old Port Isabel Road, one of the most reliable places to find the handsome and sought-after Aplomado Falcon, which we happily succeeded in doing. Other birds in the area included White-tailed Hawk, Lark Sparrow, and dozens of Long-billed Curlews in the grasslands. We arrived at the grounds of the University of Texas in Brownsville in the late afternoon. A Common Black-Hawk had been seen on the resaca there over the previous couple of weeks, but this time our luck was out, and we failed to locate it. We did, however, get a trifecta of Green, Belted and Ringed Kingfisher, as well as our first views of Least Grebes, Greater Scaup, Black Phoebe, and calling Tropical Kingbirds.

From there we headed towards the parrot roost at Brownsville's Oliveira Park, and were very lucky on the way to come across flocks of Green Parakeets (which do not use the Park), coming in to roost in the old part of town. At Oliveira Park, the parrots came in a little later than usual, but we were eventually in the midst of a pandemonium of hundreds of these noisy, colorful birds, as they eventually settled to roost in the trees above us. Most were Red-crowned Parrots, but we also saw three other species – Red-lored, White-fronted, and Yellow-headed Parrot. It was an ideal climax to a productive day of birding, during which we had seen well over a hundred species, and we celebrated with a fine dinner at Brownsville's Lola's Bistro before driving back to the Inn and a restful night.



Thursday, February 21

We started our Hidalgo County birding at the renowned Santa Ana NWR with its over 2000 acres of riparian forest, thornscrub, and wetlands. We had already seen many of the species there, but this was an opportunity to study them in as pristine an environment as can now be found in the Valley. And we did add some new birds, most notably Cave Swallows and gloriously colored drake Cinnamon Teals with their rather drabber mates. Eagle-eyed Flo also spotted an adult male American Redstart, an unusually early migrant. Most striking on our visit, though, was the number of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in the woodland areas at Santa Ana – we must have come across well over thirty.

On the way to lunch at the Blue Onion in Weslaco, we made two brief birding stops. One was on Military Highway, where we came across a feeding flock of white geese on a roadside field. They were, as expected, mostly Snow Geese but, with scope views, we did manage to distinguish at least three Ross's among them. The other stop was at the Progreso grain silos, where we picked out several Yellow-headed Blackbirds among the hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds there.

We spent all afternoon at Estero Llano Grande State Park. This is now perhaps the most popular refuge with both local residents and visiting birders in the Valley. Many of the birds become so used to people that they seem to lose much of their innate wariness, much to the delight of photographers and others. This was particularly evident on our visit when we had prolonged views of Sora and Virginia Rail, feeding in the open just a few feet from us. Other memorable sights were two Groove-billed Anis, a pair of White-tailed Kites at their nest, scores of American White Pelicans, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers on the Arroyo Colorado, and, as almost always at Estero, a co-operative roosting Common Pauraque. After an enjoyable day of birding, we drove to our hotel, the Staybridge Suites in McAllen, and dinner at the Republic of the Rio Grande.



Friday, February 22

The Staybridge Suites were just two blocks away from Quinta Mazatlan, where a long staying Crimson-collared Grosbeak, a rare visitor from Mexico, was occasionally being seen at the feeders. When we arrived, there were already other birders patiently sitting by the feeders, but no-one had seen the grosbeak that morning. So, we waited....and waited....and after an hour and a half or so, decided to move on. The time wasn't by any means wasted, though, as we had wonderful views of other birds as they came to feed, including Indigo Bunting and Clay-colored Thrush.

Bentsen State Park was our next stop. The gardens around the Visitors' Center had lots of birds, including an adult male Black-chinned Hummingbird and a Black-throated Green Warbler. Altamira Orioles were showing off at the Nature Center and, at the Green Jay Blind, we came across a more unexpected Hooded Oriole, as well as a feeding Collared Peccary. There were unfortunately no kingfishers on the resaca, but we did get fine views of overhead Gray Hawks. And, perhaps a sign of the slightly warmer weather, about a dozen Blue Spiny Lizards were basking on walls in the picnic area - the only lizards we were to see all week.

After a brief drive through a not particularly productive Anzalduas County Park, we visited Granjeno and the winter territory of a Burrowing Owl, which gave us wonderful views among the stones of its adopted home. From there we visited the nesting Monk Parakeets of Hidalgo, and then drove to the Alamo Inn, where we'd be staying our last two nights, and a welcome dinner at El Dorado.

Saturday, February 23

An early start, as we set out on the long drive west to Starr County. Our first birding stop was on the banks of the Rio Grande at Salineño, where we watched Ospreys fishing in the river, and Gray Hawks flying overhead. An Audubon's Oriole was singing close by but proved unhappily elusive. We walked the short western trail along the River coming across a Swamp Sparrow, a pair of calling Couch's Kingbirds and, best of all, a Red-billed Pigeon flying into Mexico, but we, and everyone else that morning, missed seeing any of the hoped for White-collared Seedeaters. We then enjoyed the hospitality of Merle, Lois, and Michael at the feeding station where we, as always, had wonderful views of Altamira Orioles, Green Jays, White-tipped Doves, and Long-billed Thrashers among others.

We visited Falcon State Park after that, but it was very quiet, so we soon headed out for Benito and Toni Trevino's Rancho Lomitas, where we ate our picnic lunches supplemented by Toni's delicious homemade mesquite cookies. The highlight of the afternoon was a guided tour of the Ranch (on a truck-drawn wagon!) by Benito, a leading ethnobotanist and born story teller. Benito beguiled us with tales of family and regional history, and of the many uses he and his forbears made of native plants. Our driver was the Ranch's resident naturalist, Jim Seeden, who afterwards shared his expertise with us and allowed us to watch the many birds coming to his feeders, including Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated Sparrow, and a covey of Scaled Quail. On walks around the Ranch, we also came across Greater Roadrunner, Vermilion Flycatcher, and some of us were lucky enough to see a Rufous Hummingbird. It really is a magical place! We left with regret, but needed to return to the Alamo Inn and our farewell celebratory dinner of parrilladas at the McAllen's Palenque Grill.

Sunday, February 24

On our last morning, we just had time to walk the trails at the McAllen Nature Center and Piedmont Cemetery, before everyone had to be at the airport for their flights home. We didn't compile a big list of species, but we did come across Green Parakeets, a Gray Hawk, and other old friends from the tour as well as two new species --

House Finch, which has a curiously spotty distribution in the Valley, and recently arrived Purple Martins. They brought our cumulative species total for the tour (not counting presumed escapees), to an impressive 184.

Photo Credits:

Great Blue Heron & White Pelicans, Nancy Blake (NB); Green Jay, NB; Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Terry Peterson (TP); Vermillion Flycatcher, Tom Dove (TD); Virginia Rail, TD; Long-billed Thrasher, TD; Roseate Spoonbill, Betty Andres (BA); Great Kiskadee, TD; Great Egret, BA; Green Heron with fish, BA; Snowy Egret & White Ibis, BA; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Mike Boyce (MB); Plain Chachalaca, TD; Red-lored Parrot, Peg Abbott (PA); Ringed Kingfisher, Barry Ulman (BA); Aplomado Falcon, Barry Ramdass (BR); Long-billed Dowitcher, PA; American Avocet, Carol Rivchun, (CR); Common Pauraque, Tarran Maharaj (TM); Black-necked Stilt, Carlos Sanchez (CS);